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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses some of the available curricula on the aging, their goals, their shared characteristics, and some outcomes of the curricula. Appearing in several formats for grades K-12 classroom use and including texts, videos, and workbooks, the curricula are presented as activities that may be integrated with other prescribed content. Each curriculum has universal fundamental goals: to help children develop a deeper awareness, understanding, and acceptance of the aging process, and an appreciation of the contributions made to society by older persons. Inherent in each curriculum are 19 consistent themes grouped into four categories that address fundamental issues related to aging. The categories are: the aging process; social issues related to aging; who are the elderly; and the young and the old. Examples of curricular experiences that incorporate the themes of the categories are briefly described for each grade level from kindergarten through 12th grade. The expected outcomes of these curricula on aging are illustrated by comments from students and older participants, with informal anecdotal reports from teachers who give additional insight regarding emotional/personal growth. It is concluded that such programs have not only enhanced intergenerational understanding but are having a positive educational, sociological, and philsosphical impact as well. (TRS)

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A CURRICULUM ON AGING IN OUR SCHOOLS: ITS TIME HAS COME

BY

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NOVEMBER 1985

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A Curriculum on Aging in Our Schools: Its Time Has Come

In our deliberations as educators here today, we are concerned with issues related to learning, growing, understanding, sharing, coping and continuity. We are addressing issues that, in the profoundest sense, are the basis of an educational curriculum. For indeed, a curriculum is a written plan for the total education of pupils during their enrollment in school, a plan intended to prepare the young for life.

The young, therefore, must be taught to see that there is a continuity to life and that apart from the inevitable aging of the body, people in their later years are not much different from the way they were in their youth and the way the young are now among themselves (Harris, 1974.) This notion of continuity and similarity throughout the life-span is of particular significance for all of us now, as we approach the twenty-first century in which (by mid-century) 29% of the population will be over 55 years of age and 18% will be over 65. Throughout our communities, older Americans are increasing in numbers and are participants in all aspects of community life. In light of this reality related to the growing numbers and presence of aging Americans, there is an increasing importance for all of us to understand the aging process and its relationship to our own lives, and to examine our stereotypes and our attitudes about aging and toward older adults.

Much of the research that has been conducted on attitudes of Americans toward aging and older people reveals that their attitudes are ambivilent at

best. (Kastenbaum & Durkee, 1964; Jantz et al, 1976; and Wingard et al, 1982.) Generally, Americans tend to look unfavorably at the prospect of their own aging and frequently accept the negative stereotypes of old age as filled with loneliness and poor health. However, research reporting on children's attitudes toward aging suggests that their attitudes are mixed and complex. It suggests that though children do identify some of the negative characteristics of aging related to physical deterioration, illness and isolation, they also equate aging with love, kindness, understanding and knowledge (Page et al, 1981 and Lyons et al, 1984.) The implications of these findings, especially those related to children's attitudes are of particular significance in the education of young Americans. Because children can expect to live longer and healthier lives than any preceding generation, it is important that they develop informed attitudes toward aging and older adults. This will not only contribute to their healthy aging, but will also help to reduce the divisiveness within our society between the young and old--a circumstance frequently referred to as ageism (Butler, 1975.)

One way that educators can contribute to the formation of informed attitudes toward aging and older people is by introducing planned learning experiences on aging at all levels of the school curriculum.

My discussion today, therefore, will report on some of the available curricula on aging, their goals, their shared characteristics and some outcomes.

Currently, there are a variety of curricula on aging that have been developed in the United States, England and Israel. They have been designed for children in grades K - 12 and appear in several formats for classroom use,

including workbooks, textbooks and film or video cassettes with accompanying manuals.

These curricula are presented as activities that may be intergrated within a prescribed content area such as reading, health, mathematics or social studies, that may be introduced as extra curricular activities, or presented as separate content areas. Irrespective of the age for which they are designed or the format in which they are presented, the fundamental goals of these curricula are universal, i.e., to help children develop a deeper awareness, understanding and acceptance of the aging process and an appreciation of the contributions made to society by older persons.

Inherent in each of the curricula are several consistent themes designed to give some insights into the areas that are basic to the understanding of growing and being old in America. They address some of the fundamental issues related to the notion of growing older as a continual process that takes a lifetime of endeavor (Vento, 1980.) These themes are subsumed in the following four categories:

A. The Aging Process which includes such themes as:

1. Growing old as a natural process in human development
2. The signs of aging that are associated with normal, illness free physiological changes
3. The needs of older people
4. The impact of loss as a function of growing old, and
5. The mechanisms for coping with the reality of death and dying.

B. The Social Issues Related to Aging which includes such themes as:

1. The economic, social and psychological problems of aging in our society
2. The segregation and isolation of the elderly
3. The current and historical role of the elderly in our society and how that role has effected life style choices
4. The myths and stereotypes about growing old and being old, and
5. The role and the treatment of the elderly in different cultures and the values reflected in the different patterns of treatment.

C. Who are the Elderly which includes the following themes:

1. Where and how do older people live today, in our community and in our country?
2. What do we know about the families, the education, the work and life experiences of the elderly who live in our community?
3. What are the contributions of the elderly to our community? and
4. What have been the contributions of the elderly thorughout history?

D. The Young and the Old which includes the following themes:

1. What are the similarities and differences between the young and the old?
2. What can young persons expect to do with older people?
3. How can the young and the old help each other realize some of their basic common needs?
4. How does it feel to be old as perceived by the young and the old? and
5. How can we recognize that each person at each age in the continuum of life is unique and possess individual and special characteristics.

These themes that seem to embrace the all encompassing issues related to the aging process have been thoughtfully presented in the various curricula models. The issues are addressed using an array of age appropriate activities that are as diverse and as interesting as the content. Because these concepts and the content related to aging are non-age specific and are adaptable, each grade is presented with curriculum experiences that incorporate the continum of themes described above. To demonstrate the wide range of experiences that introduced these themes, I would share some examples of the curriculum experiences suggested for use in Kindergarten through 12th grades.

Kindergartners create 2 people, (one old, one young) by placing felt shapes on a felt board and then talking about the similarities and differences of their people.

First Graders, examine worksheets depicting young offspring and adults in a variety of animal families, and are asked to match the adults and the offspring and to describe what the younger and older family members can do.

Second Graders bring to class, photos of themselves and other family members up to the oldest person in the family. They will arrange the photos chronologically on individual "my family" bulletin boards and will talk about the activities unique to each age level and the activities that can be shared by several ages.

Third Graders use maps to locate where they live and where their grandparents live. They then pinpoint these places and discuss the distances, the modes of transportation and time it will take to visit their grandparents, utilizing different modes of travel.

Fourth Graders collect articles on aging and on older persons from

newspapers and magazines, to be catagorized in a personal notebook on aging, according to health, leisure, housing, etc. The articles will be the basis for classroom discussion on the concerns of the elderly.

Fifth Graders survey the community's elderly in their homes, collecting demographic information that the student will compile and graph as part of a unit answereing the question, "Who are the elderly in our community?"

Sixth Graders prepare a weekly and monthly comparative income and expense budget for a typical working family and typical retirees in their community. After using the newspaper and other available information to determine housing, food and leisure activity costs they discuss the economic realities of the community's older persons.

Seventh Graders role play family situations illustrating several major issues related to an older family member, e.g., should a frail deteriorating elderly family member continue to live with the family or be placed in a nursing home?

Eighth Graders fill out a survey on "Facts and Myths on Aging," followed by a discussion on their perceptions of the aging process and their feelings about their own aging.

Ninth Graders invite into the classroom a panel of retirees who represent different fields and levels of contributions in the work force. The retirees describe their work experiences, the preparation for the work place, the skills needed, the working conditions over the years, and their successes and failures in the workplace.

Tenth Graders prepare a research paper on the social, environmental

and cultural factors related to longevity in several societies, contrasting industralized, agricultural and primitive societies.

Eleventh Graders simulate sensory deprivation (impaired hearing, vision, motor control) and then discuss their feelings about this deprivation. This activity can be preparation for a series of visits to a nursing home as a service commitment to the community.

Twelfth Graders debate social issues related to aging, e.g., social security, taxes, health care, housing and isolation, reflecting the values of the elders and the values of the youth. A less formal forum to address these and other social issues like drugs, violence, sex, etc. is a "rap" session between the students and a group of elders.

In addition to these specific examples of grade appropriate activities, books, articles, poetry and films are introduced to generate classroom discussion and to provide information to be used as the basis of students' creative expression in language and visual arts. An integral component of the various curricula are activities that provide opportunities for interaction between the students and the community's elderly. These interactions may occur in the classrooms, in the homes of the older persons or in any setting within the community. Indeed, the curriculum experiences that have had the most significant impact on the students' learning about and understanding of aging have been those in which there is direct contact with older persons. It is the interaction experience that commonly converts the myths and stereotypes about aging to knowledge and understanding between the generations.

What then are the expected outcomes of these curricula on aging? The overall outcomes are exemplified in the comments from young and old

participants and in informal anecdotal reports from teachers. The comments I will cite relate to some of the activities described in this paper and are representative of the comments available by participants in these curriculum experiences.

Examples of comments from students are:

- From a second grader: it's really fun to see how my big family is on "my family" bulletin board and it makes me feel good to think about all the things we can all do together. Great Grandad Bob is 80 and he does them, too.

- From a sixth grader: Boy, I couldn't live on the income of these older people. They are really clever to make it on so little and what's more important, the older people I know seem happy. I guess I'm a little spoiled and maybe I really don't need so much.

- From a ninth grader: I think these people were great to come and talk to us about their work. I never realized all the changes that can happen in one job for 30 years. I was also impressed with Mr. T. who had four really different jobs in his life. He really studied hard and I'm glad he was successful. I was also pleased to know that some women had good jobs forty years ago. Women's lib isn't all that new.

- From a twelfth grader: I learned that older people basically want the same things as anyone else and are driven by the same basic needs. I was surprised to experience the sensitivity and sharpness of the person I talked with.

Examples of comments from older people are:

- From an older person surveyed by a fifth grader: What bright mannerly children they are. They knew how to ask good questions and not make

me feel embarrassed. They must have a good teacher. I was glad that I had some cookies in the house when they came. I enjoyed the visit.

- From a retiree who participated in a rap session: I learned that the young people with whom I talked were alert, polite and interested. They were good listeners. I was surprised that they were really concerned about our feelings.

In addition to these comments from the students and older participants, the informal anecdotal reports from teachers give additional insights on the outcomes of these experiences and these reports refer to the personal and emotional growth of students and the follow-up actions that have been taken by students and older persons as an outgrowth of the curriculum experiences.

Teachers refer to students' ability to confront their own feelings about their own aging and their ability to show empathy for the feelings of the elderly as a result of their involvement in the curriculum. Furthermore, teachers call attention to an increase in student sensitivity to each other and to other social issues. The follow-up actions that have emerged from these experiences include: Students choosing independent activities in pursuit of additional information about aging and electing to become involved in programs that provide service to the frail elderly and older persons choosing to continue their relationship with the schools by volunteering to become weekly volunteers or special resource persons. Finally: a significant outcome of these experiences is the emerging intergenerational friendships between the youth and the elders who have participated in these curricula.

In addition to the informal outcomes of these curricula, it is timely to begin a formal assessment of their impact. Though the formal

universal outcomes of these curricule are not yet available, the results of one study conducted in Western Pennsylvania in 1983 on the impact of the "On Growing Older" curriculum for elementary students, (Lyons, Newman and Vasudev, 1984), may point to some of the anticipated outcomes from the curricula that are now available in the United States.

This study involved 1,400 children who were students in 20 classrooms grades 1-6 from 3 school systems in Allegheny County. The students had completed one year of a curriculum on aging in their classrooms when the study was conducted. The results of the data gathered in this study showed that the curriculum is making important contributions to the overall education of children and that this contribution is valued by the teachers. Furthermore, it suggests that the curriculum may be reinforcing children's positive attitudes toward aging and older people and it may be giving children an an overall understanding and acceptance of themselves and others. What is certain is that the inclusion in the school curriculum of a curriculum on aging is both desirable and appropriate.

From the study of this curriculum on aging, moreover, a philosophical issue emerged related to teaching children about aging and older people that transcends the rationale for curricula on aging which may be limited to the improvement of attitudes toward aging and older adults. That is, educational programs should include a view of humanity which is representative of issues relating to people of all ages as well as people of all races and colors.

As we reflect, therefore, on the notion of aging as an appropriate curriculum in the education of children, we need to consider the society in which we are living and will live, and to anticipate the questions and issues

that these curricula can address, and the possible problems that they can preempt. Furthermore, we need to accept as an indicator of need the growing number of curricula available and the emerging evidence of their positive educational, sociological and philosophical impact.

Finally, we need, perhaps to recognize, the profound importance for children to understand their own lives in the context of others and their own destiny in relationship to the destiny of those who preceded them. For children and indeed for all ages, the notion of learning and understanding about each other enables us to fulfill our individual destinies.

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